VDGIF K-9 TEAMS BREAK CASES, CALCH POACHERS AND SERVE HUNLERS BY MARK FIKE



The VDGIF K-9 team started their patrol duties in April 2011. Pictured here are the five CPO handlers with their K-9 companions along with Colonel Dee Watts (L) and Major Mike Minarik (R). Photo courtesy of the VDGIF

Law enforcement officers and their faithful K-9 companions have unraveled many crimes and led rescue missions that may never have been solved otherwise. The recently formed VDGIF K-9 team is a special response unit that Virginians will be able to depend on when needed!

A trespasser sneaks across a property line, and within an hour a shot rings out. A trophy buck is dragged back across the line and hauled into the bed of a pickup truck, which quickly departs the adjoining property.

In another scenario the season is closed for deer, but a game thief is determined to get that elusive buck that he knows is passing through the area where his stand is located. The poacher added bait around the stand to tempt the wall hanger buck to frequent the area more often. It is only a matter of time before a shot presents itself. When it does, the man pulls the trigger and smiles as he admires the huge horns on the deer before dragging it away.

Unknown to both men, their bragging about the deer spread through the local area. A Conservation Police Officer (CPO) K-9

team is summoned. The K-9 is able to lead the officer along the track where the redragged the deer, find the deer scent on truck later, and, finally, where the deer been hidden in a shed.

The above scenarios are just a few the ways that VDGIF's new K-9 teams helping deer hunters and outdoorsmen women across Virginia. The K-9 teams making quite a name for themselves. Sh "hunters" are finding out the hard way their life of theft, poaching, trespassing baiting usually ends in a conviction if offi are called in with the dogs.

The Background

So, what caused VDGIF to field teams, and whose idea was it? Major Minarik explained that Colonel Dee W director of VDGIF's Law Enforcement Division, had the idea of fielding a K-9 team since his early days as a game warden in 1987. In fact, the idea is not really a new one. Major Minarik recalls that over the years a few officers have used dogs to assist them, but they were never an official operation of VDGIF.

Major Minarik pointed out that when CPO Megan Vick came to work in 2008, she brought with her previous experience working with Search and Rescue teams.

"She had a strong desire to begin a K9 team within DGIF. She approached the Colonel with this concept and offered him a broad plan in 2010. Colonel Watts put a program together that meshed well with the mission of DGIF and the Law Enforcement program, and presented the idea to Director Bob Duncan.

"Mr. Duncan enthusiastically approved the program, and in late 2010 the selection process for potential K9 handlers began. Colonel Watts was personally involved in the interview process and helped select the three successful candidates. They traveled to Indiana to participate in the Indiana

Department of Natural Resources K 9 Academy, graduated with flying colors after 12 weeks of intensive training and testing, and began their patrol duties in Virginia in April, 2011."

Why does VDGIF need its own K-9 Unit?

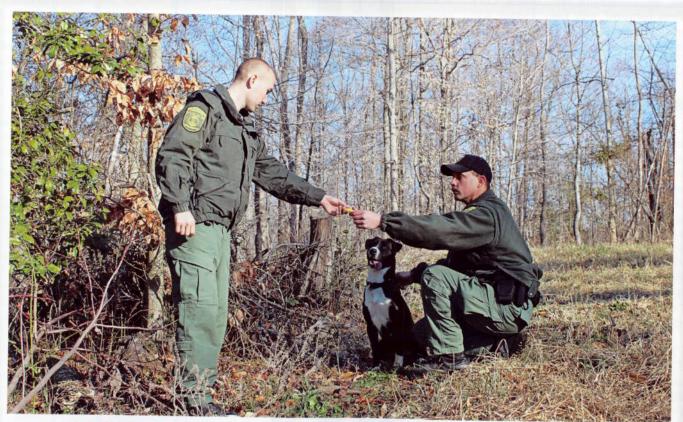
VDGIF K-9 Officers and their four legged partners are focused on wildlife resources enforcement operations, NOT general law enforcement operations. VDGIF K-9 teams are out protecting hunting and fishing interests and are specially trained for what they do. While sheriff's office K-9 teams are very good at their tasks, they are not trained to locate hidden game, spent shells fired by a poacher, blood in a pickup truck or even fish hidden in a boat. However, VDGIF K-9 teams can, when requested, be of assistance to sheriff's officers in searching for or tracking people.

In addition to the law enforcement objective for the K-9 teams, the dogs and

their handlers serve as an incredible public outreach and public relations tool for VDGIF. Any readers who visited the Outdoor Show back in August may recall seeing some of the K-9 Officers and the dogs. Bring an officer and a dog to a public place and everyone is drawn to them, asking questions and petting the dog. This creates an opportunity for the public to learn not only about VDGIF's conservation police officers and their role in protecting game and fish, but about the entire agency's mission of managing wildlife resources for everyone to enjoy.

Where do the dogs come from?

The partner dogs that were selected came from various places. CPO Vick's dog came from a Craigslist ad. Senior CPO Billhimer's partner, Justice, came from a breeder in Kansas, who had donated the dog to Kansas officers attending the same training program in Indiana that the VDGIF officers attended. Scout, who is Senior CPO Howald's four-legged partner, came from a Humane Society dog shelter as a rescue. Senior CPO Spuchesi



CPOs find that a tremendous amount of time is saved by working with K-9 Officers when trying to locate evidence. Here, Comet located a shell for her handler Senior CPO Spuchesi (right), who then handed the evidence to CPO Jackson. Photo by the author



Trespassers are no longer able to get away with sneaking on POSTED property. Comet and other VDGIF K-9s have successfully tracked and back-trailed many of them, and tickets have been written. Photo by the author

obtained his dog, Comet, in the same manner from the Portsmouth area. Senior CPO Billings partnered with Josie, another dog from the same Portsmouth shelter Comet came from.

Selection and Training

"Selection of the right officer for the job is critical," Maj. Minarik stated. "Just because someone can train a dog does not mean they will have the right combination of attributes that will allow them to be successful in the field. Being able to follow the dog's instincts and trust your dog and know he or she is on the right track is important as well," he added.

Selecting and training dogs is also critical. Officers look for dogs with a drive to work and play hard. A dog that simply runs to fetch an object on command but bores or tires easily will not do.

The first three teams ran ragged during the 2011 deer season, answering calls with great results. It was at that time that Maj. Minarik was asked by Col. Watts to manage the teams. The three K-9 officers were spread thin and asking for more officers to be added to the teams. They convinced Major Minarik they were able to do their own training here in Virginia, thus saving the department significant money. This is when Senior CPO

Frank Spuchesi (along with CPO Wes Billings in southwest Va.) successfully interviewed to become a K-9 handler.

Senior CPO Spuchesi

Senior CPO Spuchesi began his VDGIF career as a fisheries technician before transitioning to a CPO (formerly known as game wardens). He served as a CPO until he added K-9 handler to his Senior CPO title. Spuchesi decided to apply for the K-9 handler position because he has a passion for working with and training dogs. He is an avid hunter and has his own hunting dogs that he works with regularly. When Spuchesi went to select Comet from a pool of dogs preselected by the other handlers, he was looking for a dog that had a solid working drive; that was determined to please their handler and work aggressively, but was not aggressive toward people. Dogs that like to chase and play with toys aggressively provide an example of these attributes. When he first saw Comet, he noticed that when the other dogs were working or playing outside of the kennel she was trying hard to get out and do her part. This impressed him, and the two paired up, beginning a training regimen that was tough physically and mentally. Twelve weeks later they officially graduated and hit the ground running.

The biggest hurdle that Senior CPO

Spuchesi had to overcome with Comet was teaching her who her full time handler was. Considering that she had been with her original owner, then in a shelter, to another handler's house for a bit, and finally to Senior CPO Spuchesi, she was likely a bit confused. It took five weeks of training and living together before Comet realized who her master was. Over that time period they had a chance to bond, and she began listening to her new boss. They both grew as a team learning to work with and trust each other.

K-9 Team and Deer Hunter Benefits

The K-9 teams have already served deer hunters by making solid cases to catch trespassers, baiters and poachers. The first felony case that Officer Spuchesi and Comet made was in Goochland County. A CPO received a trespassing call from a landowner one sunset, during muzzleloader season. The "hunter" was located by the CPO but denied hunting. The CPO had no evidence, such as a firearm, to make the case even after getting a warrant and searching the truck. Officer Spuchesi and Comet arrived a few hours later. Further investigation proved the person was a convicted felon and not supposed to possess a firearm. At 1:30 in the morning, Officer Spuchesi asked to be taken to the woods where the man was observed. Within ten

minutes of starting an article search, Comet alerted and a SKS rifle was found covered by leaves. The evidence was presented to the person they were questioning, and he was charged with trespassing, using a highpowered rifle to hunt during muzzleloader season, and possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. What a way for Spuchesi and Comet to start a new career!

A second case involved a landowner that was suspicious of a vehicle parked near his property. He suspected trespassers were hunting. CPO Jackson, who works the Northern Neck, and Senior CPO Spuchesi and Comet were dispatched. The hunter left the scene, but Comet backtracked him from where his vehicle had been parked, past two posted signs, onto the property in question and to a treestand on the property. Officer Spuchesi was circling a tree, commenting that the hunter must have had a stand nearby. Officer Jackson told him to look up and there it was still in the tree. The next time the vehicle was observed in that area, the officers went to the stand and found him in it without blaze orange on. They asked to speak with him back at his vehicle. He attempted to deceive them by leading them out a roundabout way through thick brush

and rough terrain to avoid the posted signs after telling them he had permission to be on the property. Finally, the officers had enough and told him the dog had tracked him. The trespasser paid his tickets to avoid going to court.

A third case on the Northern Neck involved Officer Spuchesi questioning a hunter. Comet tracked him from his truck into the woods, where he was found to be in a treestand surrounded by bait to lure in deer.

Comet and Senior CPO Spuchesi have assisted in multiple hunting accident cases where Comet was able to find shells or wads to aid officers investigating the accident. Comet has also found other crucial evidence by himself. Using a trained dog has saved CPOs a lot of time over the past two years, and the K-9s have been the deciding factor in some cases as well.

I asked Senior CPO Spuchesi to give us his thoughts on his job.

"All of our cases are exciting and challenging. I love to see Comet work, and it is great to be able to help the other officers solve cases and interact with the public everywhere we go."

These are just a sample of the many cases in which Senior CPO Spuchesi and Comet have helped solve hunting related crimes. Officer Spuchesi is very pleased with the first season the two have worked together and looks forward to working with Comet in assisting other officers in the field.

CPO Jackson, who often teams up with Senior CPO Spuchesi said, "The amount of time the K-9 officers and the dogs save us finding evidence, articles, trespassers, and bait in the field is amazing."

As readers can see, the VDGIF K-9 units are helping deer hunters by catching poachers, trespassers, baiters and other game thieves. They are also saving the department time and money.

Senior CPO Spuchesi is based in the Northern Neck area of Virginia. Other K-9 teams are spread around the state to include southwest Virginia, the Shenandoah region, Central Southside and the Virginia Beach area. They all respond when needed, anywhere in their region and sometimes outside of their region. If you would like to learn more about the teams or inquire about a presentation, contact any of the handlers directly or Major Minarik.

Funding

Funding for the K-9 teams comes from the Law Enforcement Division of VDGIF. However, the Wildlife Foundation of Virginia has also been a strong supporter of the teams. They have stepped up to facilitate donations from interested individuals and organizations to be used for the K-9 teams. It was not inexpensive to get the K-9 teams up and running. Rigging vehicles costs several thousand dollars. The time and travel of officers and the equipment for the dogs and handlers, vet care and upkeep adds up quickly. VDGIF continues to value and rely on the assistance of the Wildlife Foundation of Virginia to keep them with paws and boots on the ground responding to calls and protecting wildlife, including our deer herd. Please consider donating to them to continue this great work. Information to do so can be found at www.vawildlife.org

Editor's note: Mark Fike is an outdoor writer, who lives in King George, Virginia, with his wife and children. Fike is an avid deer hunter who has articles published throughout the southeast and is a regular contributor to Whitetail Times. He welcomes correspondence from our readers and can be contacted via e-mail at snipe@crosslink.net.



Senior CPO Spuchesi is pleased with Comet's performance during the first season. He looks forward to helping CPOs solve more cases with Comet's help in upcoming seasons. Photo by the author